Brief Mention

General


This collection of updated essays pays homage to William Spengemann and Michael Colacurcio by critiquing contemporary criticism of early American literature. Asserting the difficulty of jettisoning the "nationalist telos," De Prospo points out that even the most critically aware criticism nowadays harbors a "widespread crypto-nationalist ideological foundation." Building on Colin Dayan's work on Edgar Allan Poe, De Prospo suggests that "maybe the time has come when Poe can be reclassified . . . as an early American writer who has been misread . . . as a modern one."


Why did the Whig party collapse so quickly in the 1850s? This study argues that the answer lies in this Whig elder statesman's writing, in particular his 1832 novel Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion. This novel's ambivalence toward slavery has led some scholars to assert that Kennedy is proslavery, and others to claim him as a Northern-leaning industrialist. This novel's failure to deal with the problem of slavery illuminates the Whig party's similar failure. Whereas past scholars tended to separate Kennedy's political work from his literary work, this study tries to fully integrate the two sides.

By exploring Henry David Thoreau’s fascination with history, geography, and ethnology, this study hopes to resolve what Rebecca Solnit calls the “Thoreau Problem,” the tendency to consider Thoreau the nature lover as separate from Thoreau the social reformer. As Schneider reveals, Thoreau often connected the natural sciences with the social sciences, as in his use of the concept of dispersion for both seeds and human cultures, and his discussion of the concept of succession in both botanical and racial contexts. Schneider ends by arguing that Thoreau “both accepted and endorsed the principle behind” Manifest Destiny “as an inevitable result of cultural succession.”


Traditionally, typology is a method of biblical interpretation in which an Old Testament character or phenomenon foreshadows Christ. By uncovering the typological traditions of these three American authors, Leader is pushing back against the “Perry Miller school of thought,” which “erased epistemological categories that might delineate and juxtapose currents of religious philosophy beyond the Transcendental.” She argues that Edwards’s relational ontology provides an alternative American model to Emerson’s Neoplatonic “Correspondences,” and uses the theories of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion to make sense of the connections between these writers.


In antebellum America, chattel slavery tends to overshadow other forms of subjection. By using underappreciated accounts of African American bondage, this study asserts the heterogeneity of black bondage by analyzing four varieties: imprisonment, Indian captivity, indentured servitude, and maritime capture. Investigating narratives by Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb, Harriet Wilson, and Robert Adams, this book argues that “antebellum writers . . . tapped into this imaginative matrix in order to facilitate two of the most important goals of almost all pre–Civil War black writing: legitimizing claims to personhood and framing articulations of protest.”
**Performatively Speaking: Speech and Action in Antebellum American Literature.**

A performative utterance is a statement that enacts something—a promise, vow, or oath, for example—in the very action of saying the words. This study uses speech act theory to analyze how nineteenth-century authors use language to both represent action and perform action, thus breaking down the barrier between writing and doing. By close reading specific scenes in Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1855), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Rosenthal argues that these writers “demonstrate that words can indeed restructure power.”


Twain’s characters are often interpreted as individualists fleeing civilizing forces. Even in biographical criticism, Twain’s increasing reliance on his family is seen as a threat to his iconoclastic voice. Pushing back against these dominant readings, Kiskis argues that domesticity and community are of primary importance in Twain’s later works, especially in his novels between 1876 and 1894. Kiskis focuses on each novel in relation to his theme, starting with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), and ending with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894).

**Mark Twain, American Humorist.** By Tracy Wuster. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press. 2016. xvi, 483 pp. $60.00.

This study analyzes the evolution of Twain’s reputation between 1865 and 1882, as he transitioned from a Western newspaper humorist to a nationally known humorist. The transition, as Wuster argues, was not inevitable, and indeed, there “was not one ‘Mark Twain,’ but multiple and overlapping images of a complex character in a time of great changes in American literature and American life.” The author recognizes three stages in Twain’s identity as a humorist: his California days as a newspaper reporter, his association with the national humorists, and the tension between widespread popularity and “the possibility of literary respectability.”
Ball Don’t Lie! Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball.
Cloth, $79.50; paper, $19.95; e-book, $19.95.

Theorizing at the “intersection of language and basketball,” this cultural study examines the central myths that construct the sport, from basketball’s invention in 1891 to its expansive global present. Colás excavates the naturalization and circulation of the game’s predominant myths to demonstrate how “alternative accounts” of critical genealogies and “inventions” central to the sport’s performance might challenge these narratives. The three chronological sections that organize this project consider how the sport’s inception, its intersectional growth with the Civil Rights movement, and contemporary global spread have contributed to dynamics of race, class, gender, and “physical culture” in US society.


In black folklore, trickster figures use their intelligence to survive, and include the flying African cycle, animal tales, slave tricksters, and Signifying Monkey narrative poems. Although scholars have explored how black and white aesthetics intertwine, there has been relatively little work examining how black folklore influenced white authors. Martin hopes to fill that gap by analyzing the impact of black oral culture on works by John Pendleton Kennedy, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Joel Chandler Harris, and Mark Twain, arguing that these authors “drew from African American aesthetic techniques to create character portraits that covertly function to demythologize racial definitions.”


Relishing details about James’s life as they intersect with his writings, this collection of essays closely analyzes such works as Daisy Miller (1878), The American (1877), The Beast in the Jungle (1903), and The Wings of the Dove (1902). These colloquial essays interweave personal anecdotes from Monteiro’s archival experiences with speculations about James’s work, such as the connection between The Wings of the Dove and Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun (1860), how Edgar Allan Poe’s Auguste Dupin may have influenced James’s fiction, and James’s relation to Portugal. From James’s intense interest in Robert Browning to his use of Marian and Henry Adams as characters, this collection savors every Jamesian detail.

Positioned as a supplement to Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Psyche Reborn* (1981), this book focuses on H.D.’s late long poems, particularly the spiritual and esoteric texts that influenced her in her last decade of writing. Tracing her marginalia in these books, Robinson asserts that occultism not only inspired her poetry but also offered her a framework to think about her life events, “allowing for an extensive project of weaving together her memories, dreams, visions, fantasies, and future.” By locating the sources of H.D.’s gnosticism, hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism, this book provides detailed readings of *Trilogy* (1973), *Helen in Egypt* (1961), and *Hermetic Definition* (1971).


Literary merit, as Farr asserts, has too often been about generating a list of books, rather than conversations. Thus she coins the “Ulysses delusion” to refer to the phenomenon of how, despite lying at the top of numerous best-book lists, Joyce’s book is little read outside of academia. Farr argues that critics and teachers are holding the novel for ransom by taking a popular genre and setting themselves up as the guards and priesthood of interpretation. She explores this metaphor of ransom by analyzing such authors as Vladimir Nabokov, William Faulkner, Jane Austen, Jodi Picoult, Ayn Rand, and J. K. Rowling.


In American military lingo, D-day refers to any military operation launching date. Most Americans, though, associate D-day with the June 6, 1944, allied invasion of Normandy’s beaches, conjuring images of heroism, sacrifice, and the redemptive quality of violence. Rather than investigating the event itself, this study examines the meanings Americans have given D-day in the ensuing decades, mobilizing memory for present-day needs. Dolski argues that D-day, as cultural memory, helped to unify Americans disaffected by the Vietnam War. It is a military event that perpetually restores the United States, just as it “represented a morality tale of America’s selfless sacrifice to restore order in the world.”

As a Beat Generation experimental writer, farmer, and Harvard anthropologist, Burroughs has largely been overlooked by ecocritics. Weidner hopes to fill the gap by analyzing *Naked Lunch* (1959), *Minutes to Go* (1960), *The Yage Letters* (1963), *Nova Express* (1964), the Red Night trilogy, *The Cat Inside* (1986), and *Ghost of Chance* (1991) from conservationist, ecological, and biocentric positions. Dividing Burroughs’s career into several stages, such as his transition from experimental writings to more linear narratives, this study argues that “the green anarchist leanings of transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau are the crux in establishing the real relevance of the Beat Generation, and more specifically William Burroughs, to ecocriticism.”


Ever since three of his works were translated in a Peruvian newspaper in 1847, Poe has garnered a significant connection with Spanish American letters. In the twentieth century, though, Poe’s image within Spanish America changed from “poet-prophet to a timeless fiction writer.” Esplin argues that Borges is the major agent in Poe’s transformation, though Horacio Quiroga and Julio Cortázar also play a role. He asserts that Poe influenced Borges’s writing, and Borges’s writing, in turn, transformed how readers envision Poe. *Borges’s Poe* is divided into three parts: Borges’s literary criticism, translations, and Poe-inspired short fiction.


Noting that the topic of age is missing in both Routledge’s and Blackwell’s cultural studies series, Hobbs sees his work as trying to remedy this deficit. This study is the aging-focused equivalent of second-wave feminism: using literature to explore cultural understandings of old age, with particular focus on going beyond misery narratives to discover positive models of aging men. Hobbs analyzes fiction by Jonathan Franzen, Paul Auster, Ethan Canin, John Updike, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, Anne Tyler, and Jane Smiley, arguing that aging is just as much a preoccupation for men as for women.

In this book about “modernity and Cormac McCarthy’s responses to it,” Monk considers how McCarthy’s writings explore the development of modernity through “animals, the aesthetic, the spiritual, and the broadly ecological.” *True and Living Prophet of Destruction* attempts to “veer from the norm” of the literary monograph in its methodology and organization. A chapter of autoethnography chronicling Monk’s affective responses to reading McCarthy complements the overall arrangement of the monograph, which is designed to be as accessible to the general reader of McCarthy as much as the specialist scholar.


In this book-length study of author and journalist Thompson, McEneaney emphasizes Thompson’s literary influences and strategies, most notably the effect of Thompson’s storied use of humor that “twisted or warped” such “literary templates . . . to create original commentary.” McEneaney mines Thompson’s ample correspondence for biographical detail and social context applied toward a series of readings covering a range of forms including novels, nonfiction prose, essays, and short stories. This work may be of interest to scholars of New Journalism and US countercultural movements of the late twentieth century.


This study of environmental activist and author Williams meditates on the interwoven strands of lyricism, spirituality, and the natural world in Williams’s writings about the American West. Reading eight recent nonfiction prose essays by Williams alongside T. S. Eliot’s 1943 collection *Four Quartets*, Whitt traces a shared attention to themes of “allegory, regionalism, reconciliation, and the search for meaning” in these works. Two concluding chapters focusing on US environmentalism and literary journalism emphasize the contemporary social, political, and artistic challenges that inform Williams’s compositions.

This book surveys forty-four plays by Blessing, from 1975’s The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid and the critically acclaimed 1988 play A Walk in the Woods to 2015’s Uncle. Zwerling arranges Blessing’s works by theme and chronology, drawing on archival materials and extensive interviews with the playwright to contextualize the author’s formal and topical diversity. Appendices detailing Blessing’s plays and awards provide a quick reference for readers while highlighting the playwright’s ongoing contributions to US theater. This work will interest researchers and practitioners of contemporary US drama and performance.


Using Alain Badiou’s philosophy, Huber defines events as nonontological, contingent, and singular ruptures. By analyzing Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006), Jess Walter’s The Zero (2006), Mark Z. Danielewski’s Only Revolutions (2006), Paul Beatty’s Slumberland (2008), and Thomas Pynchon’s Against the Day (2006), he argues that events and subjects are two phenomena that are “inherently reciprocal.” America as a concept is fundamentally associated with emphatic events, according to Huber. His goal is to employ a theoretical approach that opposes poststructuralism and postmodernism, while also avoiding the traditional humanist conception of the subject.


A study of violence and Generation X, Disappear Here outlines how the cultural experience that defines this cohort, born between 1960 and 1980, registers dramatic shifts in representations of real and virtual violence from the late twentieth century to the present. Outlining the attitudes and aesthetics of Generation X, Mandel attends to violence “onscreen, online, and in a literary text” in novels, film and television, media, music, and digital culture. Critical and philosophical theories of violence complement readings of key sites of violence for Generation X, including Fight Club, the work of Brett Easton Ellis, and the 9/11 novel.